

OCR Religious Ethics for AS and A2

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OCR Religious Ethics for AS and A2

Third Edition

Structured directly around the specification, this is a textbook for students of Advanced Subsidiary or Advanced Level courses and is endorsed by OCR for use with the OCR A Level Religious Studies specification. The updated third edition covers all the necessary topics for Religious Ethics in an enjoyable student-friendly fashion. Each chapter includes:

- a list of key issues
- OCR specification checklist
- explanations of key terminology
- overviews of key scholars and theories
- self-test review and exam practice questions.

To maximise students' chances of success, the book contains a section dedicated to answering examination questions. It comes complete with diagrams and tables, lively illustrations, a comprehensive glossary and full bibliography. Additional resources are available via the companion website at www.routledge.com/cw/oliphant.

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OCR Religious Ethics for AS and A2

Third Edition

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[How to Use this Book](#)

This book has been written for OCR students but it will be of use to all AS and A2 level Religious Studies students, as well as students taking the Ethics section of AS/A2 Philosophy and Scottish National Examinations at Higher Level.

The book is designed for students to use in class and at home. Every chapter provides an overview of the major themes and issues of Religious Ethics on the OCR specification for Religious Studies. The following six features are designed to help you make the most effective use of the book:

1 What you will learn about in this chapter

This highlights the key issue or issues you should think about while studying each chapter.

2 OCR checklist

The box in each chapter about the OCR specification tells you which topics from the AS/A2 Religious Studies course are covered.

3 Essential terminology box

At the beginning of every chapter there is a box listing the key terminology for the chapter. You should be able to use this terminology accurately in examinations.

4 Review questions

The review questions in every chapter are designed to test your understanding of topics discussed in the chapter. Make use of this section as a way to assess your learning about and from the issues in the chapter.

5 Examination questions practice

At the end of every chapter there is a section about answering examination questions on the topic, with an exam style question.

6 Further reading

The reading suggested at the end of each chapter suggests ways of exploring topics in greater depth.

[Answering Examination Questions](#)

To be successful in Advanced Level Religious Studies you must learn examination techniques. Some advice to guide you is given below, but there is no substitute for practising writing examination questions. There are example questions at the end of the chapters in this book, and your teacher will give you plenty of other questions with which to practise.

Some important aspects to answering examination questions are explained below.

Your work will be assessed on how well you meet the following two Assessment Objectives (AO):

AO1 Demonstrate Knowledge and Understanding

- select and demonstrate clearly relevant knowledge and understanding through the use of evidence, examples and correct language and terminology appropriate to the course of study. In addition, for synoptic assessment, A Level candidates should demonstrate knowledge and understanding of the connections between different elements of their course of study.

AO2 Analysis, Evaluation and Application

- critically evaluate and justify a point of view through the use of evidence and reasoned argument. In addition, for synoptic assessment, A Level candidates should relate elements of their course of study to their broader context and to aspects of human experience.

All AS questions are in two parts (a) and (b). Part (a) assesses AO1 and Part (b) assesses AO2. These are weighted at 70% for AO1 and 30% for AO2.

All A2 questions are in one part. This combines both AO1 and AO2. The AOs are weighted at 70% for AO1 and 30% for AO2.

All questions are marked according to the OCR Levels of Response. See:
<http://www.ocr.org.uk/qualifications/as-a-level-gce-religious-studies-h172-h572/>.

Practise writing answers

It is very important that you practise answering questions for Religious Studies examinations by handwriting answers. In an examination you have very little time to write answers and you have to write not type. This takes practice; try to avoid typing answers when you practise doing examination questions at home.

SUBJECT KNOWLEDGE

At both AS and A2 level the majority of marks are given for your demonstration of a good understanding of the topic the question is examining. It is important not only that you learn the work you have studied, but also that you are able to select the knowledge that is relevant to an answer. For example, if the question is (AS level): *Explain how a follower of Natural Law might approach the issue of abortion*, your answer should be focused on the Natural Law approach to abortion, not writing everything you know about Natural Law or abortion.

When preparing for examination questions, it is a good idea to think about not only what a question is asking, but also what material you have studied that is relevant to the question.

Selecting the correct information

Think about how you would answer the two questions below. Make a list of the topics and information you need to include in any answer. Be specific – for example, do not just say 'Utilitarianism' for question 1.

1 *Explain Mill's approach to Utilitarianism.*

2 *Explain the main strengths of Utilitarianism.*

TIMING

It is very important that you learn how to complete questions in the time available. In an examination the time available is very limited. It is a good idea to practise timing yourself writing answers to examination-style questions. You will get a low mark if a question is incomplete, as this limits the maximum level your answer can reach.

Always try to spend equal amounts of time on each whole question you answer, as each question is worth the same number of marks. However, at AS level there are two parts within a question. In this case you may be expected to spend slightly longer completing the section of each question for which the higher mark is awarded.

UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTIONS

It is very important that you think carefully about what a question is asking you. The table below focuses on some of the common instruction words used in OCR questions and what they mean.

Instruction word

Explanation

Explain as in: '**Explain** Kant's theory of duty.'

When a question uses the word **Explain**, it is telling you to demonstrate your knowledge of the topic in the question, and your ability to select and show understanding of relevant information and to use technical terms accurately.

Thus, in the example question, you would need to demonstrate what you know about Kant's theory of duty, such as the categorical imperative, universalisability and the importance of good will.

Discuss as in: '*People are not free to make moral decisions.*' **Discuss.**

The word **Discuss** in a question is telling you that you should examine the strengths and weaknesses of arguments for and against the statement in the question. You need to consider whether arguments in favour of and against the statement are successful. To do this, you will need to demonstrate an accurate understanding of one or more philosophers' views and the strengths and weakness of these views.

'Kant's ethical theory is too inflexible.' **Discuss.**

At **AS level**, you would need to state (not explain in detail) one or more arguments in agreement with the statement, such as Kant's lack of consideration for consequences, the conflict of maxims, and the importance of universal and unchanging principles, and present reasons for and/or against the claim.

At **A2 level** if a question uses the word **Discuss**, as well as considering arguments for and against the statement in the question, you need to explain accurately and in detail the philosophers' views and ideas to which the statement is referring. At **AS level** you need only to state the views briefly in a **Discuss** question.

Assess as in: '**Assess a Utilitarian approach to the environment.**'

Assess is normally used as an **A2 level** instruction word. By **Assess** the examiner means that you should first **explain** the issue you are being asked to assess and second you should present arguments for and against the issue you have been asked to assess. Part of your assessment should present reasons analysing the strengths and weaknesses of arguments supporting or disagreeing with the issue. You should finish your answer with a conclusion which presents the result of your assessment.

In the case of the example question, you would need to explain clearly and precisely the anthropomorphism of Utilitarianism and the application of the principle of utility. Second, you should present philosophers' and theologians' arguments for and against a Utilitarian approach. You should analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the philosophers' and theologians' arguments concerning a Utilitarian approach to the environment.

Remember that at A2 the two AOs are combined and that you need to demonstrate both in your answer.

To what extent as in: '**To what extent** can conscience be considered to be the voice of God?'

The instruction **to what extent** commonly appears in the Ethics A2 paper, such as 'To what extent can conscience be considered to be the voice of God?' The question asks why some philosophers and theologians might hold this view. Next, you need to assess the strengths and weaknesses of reasons for holding these views and compare the strengths of the different reasons for holding this view with each other. The **extent** will be limited or defined by the strongest view you have considered.

In the example question you need to explain the strengths and weaknesses of reasons philosophers and theologians give when discussing the ways conscience comes from God. The extent of the role of God in forming conscience will be decided by comparing the different reasons and arguments you present and deciding which one is strongest.

Remember that at A2 the two AOs are combined and that you need to demonstrate both in your answer.

How fair as in: '**How fair** is the claim that moral language is meaningful, even if religious language is not?'

How fair is another instruction phrase which commonly appears in the Ethics A2 paper, such as 'How fair is the view that Religious Ethics are absolute?' To complete a task beginning with **how fair** you need to explain reasons why philosophers and theologians support this view and then even if Religious Ethics are absolute **assess** the strengths and weaknesses of these reasons. The **fairness** of the view in the question is decided by comparing the strengths of reasons for and against the view in the question and deciding which reasoning is strongest. The view in the question is only fair if you can demonstrate that the reasoning of the philosophers and theologians in agreement with the view in the question is stronger than that of those who disagree.

In the case of the example question above, you would need to explain the reasons why philosophers and theologians might believe Religious Ethics are absolute, and consider the strengths and weaknesses of these reasons when compared to the views of people who disagree. The **fairness** of the view in the question is decided by considering whether arguments that *moral language is meaningful even if religious language is not* are stronger than views which disagree.

Remember that at A2 the two AOs are combined and that you need to demonstrate both in your answer.

[Timeline](#)

[Scientists, Ethicists and Thinkers](#)

This timeline gives the names and dates of people whose great ideas are discussed within the book. This list is not a comprehensive list of every important or significant ethicist of Western civilisation.

Protagoras (c.480–c.411 BCE)

480 BCE

Socrates (c.470–c.399 BCE)

Plato (428–347 BCE)

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Epicurus (341–270 BCE)

Cicero (106–43 BCE)

Jesus of Nazareth (c.3 BCE–30)

Saul of Tarsus/Paul (9–67)

0

Eusebius (c.260–c.340)

Ambrose of Milan (c.340–397)

St Jerome (c.347–420)

Augustine of Hippo (354–430)

Pelagius (c.360–c.420)

St Francis of Assisi (1182–1226)

1100

Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274)

1200

John Duns Scotus (c.1266–1308)

William of Ockham (1280–1349)

Francisco de Vitoria (1480–1546)

1400

John Calvin (1509–1564)

1500

Francisco Suárez (1548–1617)

Francis Bacon (1561–1626)

Hugo Grotius (1583–1645)

René Descartes (1596–1650)

Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677)

1600

John Locke (1632–1704)

Isaac Newton (1642–1727)

Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716)

Joseph Butler (1692–1752)

David Hume (1711–1776)

1700

Emerich de Vattel (1714–1767)

Paul-Henri Thiry (Baron) d'Holbach (1723–1789)

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804)

1800

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832)

Pierre Laplace (1749–1827)

John Henry Newman (1801–1890)

John Stuart Mill (1806–1873)

Charles Robert Darwin (1809–1882)

Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855)

Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900)

Ivan Pavlov (1849–1936)

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939)

Clarence Darrow (1857–1938)

Pope Pius XI (1857–1939)

Mohandas 'Mahatma' Gandhi (1869–1948)

H.A. Prichard (1871–1947)

Bertrand Russell (1872–1970)

G.E. Moore (1873–1958)

W.D. Ross (1877–1971)

John B. Watson (1878–1958)

Albert Einstein (1879–1955)

Karl Barth (1886–1968)

Aldo Leopold (1887–1948)

Reinhold Niebuhr (1892–1971)

Jean Piaget (1896–1980)

Pope Paul VI (1897–1978)

Erich Fromm (1900–1980)

1900

Werner Heisenberg (1901–1976)

Alan Marshall (1902–1984)

Karl Popper (1902–1994)

B.F. Skinner (1904–1990)

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980)

Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–1945)

Rachel Carson (1907–1964)

C.L. Stevenson (1908–1979)

A.J. Ayer (1910–1989)

Richard Brandt (1910–1997)

Aarne Naess (1912–2009)

Thomas Merton (1915–1968)

J.L. Mackie (1917–1981)

John Hospers (1918–2011)

G.E.M Anscombe (1919–2001)

R.M. Hare (1919–2002)

James Lovelock (1919–)

Philippa Foot (1920–2010)

John Rawls (1921–2002)

Lawrence Kohlberg (1927–1987)

Annette Baier (1929–2012)

Germain Grisez (1929–)

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968)

Alasdair MacIntyre (1929–)

Judith Jarvis Thomson (1929–)

Bernard Williams (1929–2003)

Enda McDonagh (1930–)

Daniel MacGuire (1931–)

Richard Holloway (1933–)

Ted Honderich (1933–)

Richard Sylvan (Routley) (1935–1996)

Walter Wink (1935–2012)

Keith Ward (1938–)

Helga Kuhse (1940–)

James Rachels (1941–2003)

J. Baird Callicott (1941–)

Richard Dawkins (1941–)

Jonathan Glover (1941–)

Michael Slote (1941–)

Joseph Boyle (1942–)

Peter Van Inwagen (1942–)

Rosalind Hursthouse (1943–)

Roger Scruton (1944–)

Mary Anne Warren (1946–2010)

Julia Annas (1946–)

Peter Singer (1946–)

Richard Gula (1947–)

Robert Louden (1953–)

Steven Pinker (1954–)

Robert Song (1962–)

1962

[AS ETHICS](#)

[PART I](#)

[1 What Is Ethics?](#)

Essential terminology

Deduction

Definition

Factual statement

Fallacy Logic

Ethics is the philosophical study of good and bad, right and wrong. It is commonly used interchangeably with the word 'morality', and is also known as moral philosophy. The study of ethics requires you to look at moral issues such as abortion, euthanasia and cloning, and to examine views that are quite different from your own. You need to be open-minded, you need to use your critical powers, and above all learn from the way different ethical theories approach the issues you study for AS and A2.

Ethics needs to be applied with logic so that we can end up with a set of moral beliefs that are supported with reasons, are consistent and reflect the way we see and act in the world. Ethical theories are constructed logically, but give different weights to different concepts.

However, it is not enough to prove that the theory you agree with is true and reasonable; you must also show where and how other philosophers went wrong.

FALLACIES

With the possible exception of you and me, people usually do not have logical reasons for what they believe. This is especially true for ethical issues. Here are some examples of how not to arrive at a belief. We call them *fallacies*.

Here are some common beliefs; you may recognise your own reasons for holding a particular view:

- A belief based on the mistaken idea that a rule which is generally true is without exceptions; for example: 'Suicide is killing oneself – killing is murder – I'm opposed to euthanasia.'
- A belief based on peer pressure, appeal to herd mentality or xenophobia; for example: 'Most people don't believe in euthanasia, so it's probably wrong.'
- A belief in fact or obligation simply based on sympathy; for example: 'It's horrible to use those poor apes to test drugs, so I'm opposed to it.'
- An argument based on the assumption that there are fewer alternatives than actually exist; for example: 'It's either euthanasia or long, painful suffering.'
- An argument based on only the positive half of the story; for example: 'Animal research has produced loads of benefits – that's why I support it.'
- Hasty generalisation: concluding that a population has some quality based on a misrepresentative sample; for example: 'My grandparents are in favour of euthanasia, and I would think that most old people would agree with it.'
- An argument based on an exaggeration; for example: 'We owe all of our advances in medicine to

animal research, and that's why I'm for it.'

- The slippery slope argument: the belief that a first step in a certain direction amounts to going far in that direction; for example: 'If we legalise euthanasia this will inevitably lead to killing the elderly, so I'm opposed to it.'
- A subjective argument that truth varies according to personal opinion; for example: 'Euthanasia may be right for you, but it's wrong for me.'
- An argument based on tradition: the belief that X is justified simply because X has been done in the past; for example: 'We've done well without euthanasia for thousands of years, we shouldn't change now.'

Is-ought fallacy

David Hume (1711–1776) observed that often when people are debating a moral issue they begin with facts and slide into conclusions that are normative; that is, conclusions about how things ought to be. He argued that no amount of facts taken alone can ever be sufficient to imply a normative conclusion: the is-ought fallacy. For example, it is a fact that slavery still exists in some form or other in many countries – that is an 'is'. However, this fact is morally neutral, and it is only when we say we 'ought' to abolish slavery that we are making a moral judgement. The fallacy is saying that the 'ought' statement follows logically from the 'is', but this does not need to be the case. Another example is to say that humans possess reason and this distinguishes us from other animals – it does not logically follow that we ought to exercise our reason to live a fulfilled life.

AREAS OF ETHICS

Ethics looks at what you *ought* to do as distinct from what you may in fact do. Ethics is usually divided into three areas: *meta-ethics*, *normative ethics* and *applied ethics*.

1 *Meta-ethics* looks at the meaning of the language used in ethics, and includes questions such as: are ethical claims capable of being true or false, or are they expressions of emotion? If true, is that truth only relative to some individual, society or culture? What does it mean to say something is good or bad, and what do the words 'good' and 'bad' mean? (This is studied at A2.)

2 *Normative ethics* asks the question 'what ought I to do?' and attempts to arrive at practical moral standards (or norms) that tell us right from wrong, and how to live moral lives. These are what we call ethical theories. This may involve explaining the good habits we should acquire, looking at whether there are duties we should follow, or whether our actions should be guided by their consequences for ourselves and/or others. There are various ethical theories that are described as normative:

- **Teleological** or **consequential** ethics, where ethical decisions are based on the consequences of an action
- **Deontological** ethics, which is based on duty and obligation
- **Virtue Ethics**, which is based on the good character of the moral agent (this is studied at A2)
- Ethics based on **God-given laws (Divine Command)** – see [Chapter 6](#) on Religious Ethics.

3 *Applied ethics* is the application of theories of right and wrong and theories of value to specific issues such as abortion, euthanasia, cloning, foetal research, and lying and honesty.

Ethics is not just giving your own opinion, and the way it is studied at AS and A2 is very like philosophy: it is limited to facts, logic and definition. Ideally, a philosopher is able to prove that a theory is true and reasonable based on accurate definitions and verifiable facts. Once these definitions and facts have been established, a philosopher can develop the theory through a process of deduction, by showing what logically follows from the definitions and facts. The theory may then be applied to controversial moral issues. It is a bit like baking a cake.

THE DEFINITIONS OF THE MAIN THEORIES IN NORMATIVE ETHICS

Deontological ethics – certain actions are right or wrong in themselves. Deontological ethics is concerned with the acts that are right or wrong in themselves (**intrinsically** right or wrong). This may be because these acts go against some duty or obligation or they break some **absolute** law; for example a deontologist may say that killing is wrong as the actual act of killing another human being is always wrong. Deontologists are always certain in their moral decisions and can take strong moral positions, such as being totally against war. On the other hand they do not take into account the circumstances, or different cultures or different religious views.

Teleological ethics is concerned with the ends, results or consequences of an action. Followers of teleological ethics consider the consequence of an ethical decision before they act. The action is not intrinsically good (good in itself) but is only good if the results are good – the action produces happiness and love. However, the main problem with teleological ethics is that it can never be sure what the result or consequence of an action might be – it is possible to make an educated guess but not to be absolutely sure, and sometimes we can only tell if the consequences of an action are right with hindsight. Another problem with teleological ethics is that some actions are always wrong, rape for example, and can never be justified by the consequence.

Moral objectivism claims that there are certain universal and absolute values. Modern moral objectivists do not believe that these universal values hold for ever, but they hold until they are proven to be false.

Moral subjectivism claims that moral statements are simply a matter of personal opinion. We simply make our own morality according to our own experiences and see our moral views as true for ourselves or our society and not necessarily applying to others.

Intrinsic good – something is good in itself: it has value simply because it exists without any references to the consequences. This applies to deontological ethics.

Instrumental good – something that is good because of the effects or consequences it has, or as a means to some other end or purpose. To explain this **Peter Singer** (*Practical Ethics*, 2011, p. 246) uses the example of money – it has value because of the things we can buy with it, but if we were marooned on a desert island we would not want it.

ETHICAL THEORIES

If we are to have valid ethical arguments then we must have some normative premises to begin with. These normative premises are either statements of ethical theories themselves or statements implied by ethical theories.

The ethical theories that will be examined in this book are:

Utilitarianism:

An action is right if it maximises the overall happiness of all people.

Kantian Ethics:

Treat other people the way you wish they would treat you, and never treat other people as if they were merely objects.

Cultural relativism:

What is right or wrong varies according to the beliefs of each culture.

Divine Command:

Do as the creator tells you.

Natural Law:

Everything is created for a purpose, and when this is examined by human reason a person should be able to judge how to act in order to find ultimate happiness.

Situation Ethics:

Based on agape which wills the good of others.

Virtue Ethics:

Agent-centred not act-centred. Practising virtuous behaviour will lead to becoming a virtuous person and contribute to a virtuous society.

[Moral Absolutism and Moral Relativism](#)

Essential terminology

Absolute

Consequentialism

Cultural relativism

Descriptive relativism

Moral absolutism

Moral objectivism

Moral relativism

Subjectivism

This chapter introduces some of the main ethical theories that are looked at in more detail in later chapters. You should read this chapter again once you have studied them. You will need absolute and relative morality for the AS Ethics paper.

Examination questions on absolute and relative morality may be approached in more than one way:

- looking at normative ethical theories, both absolute and relative
- looking at Cultural relativism
- looking at relative meta-ethical theories.

WHAT YOU WILL LEARN ABOUT IN THIS CHAPTER

- What is meant in ethics to call a system relativist.
- Moral relativism as distinct from Cultural relativism.
- Situation Ethics as an example of relative ethical systems.
- What is meant by moral absolutism.
- Absolute and relative ways of understanding 'right' and 'wrong'.
- The skills to decide whether there are any moral absolutes, or whether morality is completely relative, or whether there is an in-between position.
- The strengths and weaknesses of moral absolutism.
- The strengths and weaknesses of moral relativism.

KEY SCHOLARS

- Protagoras (c.480–c.411 BCE)
- Socrates (c.470–c.399 BCE)
- Plato (428–347 BCE)
- Aristotle (384–322 BCE)
- Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991)

THE OCR CHECKLIST

Candidates should be able to demonstrate knowledge and understanding of:

- the concepts of absolutist and relativist morality;
- what it means to call an ethical theory absolutist and objective;
- what it means to call an ethical theory relativist and subjective;
- the terms deontological and teleological.

Candidates should be able to discuss critically these concepts and their strengths and weaknesses.

From OCR A Level Religious Studies Specification H172.

WHAT IS ETHICAL RELATIVISM?

We all make ethical judgements about what we consider to be right and wrong, and we often have different views about ethical issues. We make judgements about actions or behaviour as being absolutely wrong in all circumstances – this is absolute ethics, which takes a deontological approach. An ethical relativist, on the other hand, believes that there are circumstances and situations in which actions or behaviour that are usually considered to be ‘wrong’ can be considered to be ‘right’.

Moral relativism

There are no universally valid moral principles and so there is no one true morality.

There are basically two sorts of ethical relativism: Cultural relativism, which says that right and wrong, good and evil are relative to a culture, to a way of life that is practised by a whole group of people; and individual relativism, which says that right and wrong, good and evil are relative to the preferences of an individual. Both cultural and individual relativism hold that there are no universally valid moral principles. All principles and values are relative to a particular culture or age. Ethical relativism means that there is no such thing as good ‘in itself’, but if an action seems good to you and bad to me, that is it, and there is no objective basis for us to discover the truth.

The problem today is that relativism tends to lead people into thinking that truth depends on who holds it, or that there is only one truth – their own. We often hear people say, ‘Well that’s your point of view, but it’s not mine’, and this can actually be a way of stopping thinking. Truth then no longer matters, as everything depends on the community to which one belongs, or one’s own perspective. Where there is no agreed set of values, relativism can seem very attractive.

Subjectivism

Each person’s values are relative to that person and so cannot be judged objectively.

Sophists

This was a name originally applied by the ancient Greeks to learned men. In the fifth century CE, the Sophists were travelling teachers. They concluded that truth and morality were matters of opinion and emphasised skills such as rhetoric.

THE ORIGINS OF RELATIVISM

We can trace the origins of Western ethical thinking to the city states of ancient Greece. At the time of Homer (c. eighth century BCE), being good meant being a heroic warrior, and the type of person you were – noble, courageous, strong – was the most important thing. This became further developed in the ethical theories of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, who looked at the ideas of character and virtue.

However, everything began to change, and by the sixth century BCE there was no longer any moral certainty. **Alasdair MacIntyre** in his book *A Short History of Ethics* (1985) says this was due to the discovery of other civilisations with different ideas of what it meant to be good and changes within Greek society itself. The discovery of these different cultures led the Greeks to question the absoluteness of their own moral ideas; also, as the city states expanded, it became less clear what a person's role in society was and so more difficult to know how to live a virtuous life.

Eventually a series of wise men, known as Sophists, appeared and argued that all morality was relative – right and wrong varied from place to place, from time to time and from person to person. Protagoras famously said: 'Man is the measure of all things.' All they saw as important was getting on in life, taking part in political life and fitting in – 'truth' was a variable concept. Socrates and later Plato and Aristotle worked on proving this view to be wrong.

Protagoras (c.480–c.411 BCE)

Protagoras was a Greek philosopher, born in Thrace. He taught in Athens for money. He said that nothing is absolutely good or bad and that each individual is their own final authority when making decisions. Like Socrates, he was charged with impiety and fled to Sicily, but drowned on the journey.

Socrates

It is difficult to distinguish between the views of Socrates and Plato, as Socrates left no writings and everything we know about him we know through his pupil Plato. However, Plato's dialogues have Socrates as the main protagonist who argues that all humans share a common, innate understanding of what is morally good.

Socrates (c.470–399 BCE)

Socrates did not leave any writings of his own but, as a Greek philosopher, he shaped Western philosophy. His pupil Plato wrote dialogues which claim to describe Socrates' views. He is also mentioned in the works of Xenophon and others. At the age of 70 he was tried for impiety and sentenced to death by poisoning (probably hemlock).

Plato

Plato explained how this moral knowledge was acquired with his theory of the Forms – moral knowledge came from the highest of the forms: the Form of the Good. According to Plato, there are objective and universal moral truths – the complete opposite of the view of the Sophists.

Plato (428–347 BCE)

Plato is one of the most famous philosophers in history. His writings influenced the development of philosophy throughout the Western world and a large number of his books survive. Plato was taught by the first great Western philosopher, Socrates. Most of the books he wrote have Socrates

as the leading character. His early books are about Socrates' philosophy, but the later ones present arguments from Plato's own thinking. Plato wrote about many issues, ranging from the existence of the soul and the nature of beauty to who should run a government. Plato founded his own school of philosophy, like a university, called the Academia, from which we get the word 'Academy' in English. He died in 347 BCE, aged 81.

Aristotle

Aristotle approached ethics from a completely different angle, and although he thought universal truths could be discovered, he rejected Plato's idea of the world of the Forms as he thought that understanding of goodness and wisdom could be found in this world. According to Aristotle, we can find out how to be virtuous by looking at virtuous people and by discovering how we can better develop our character.

Socrates, Plato and Aristotle all oppose complete relativism from different angles and ask people not to just blindly follow what everyone else is thinking and doing, to consider what they believe and why they believe it, to dialogue with others and to look for truths that are not limited by their own time and culture.

It cannot be assumed that relativism means the same thing to everyone and this chapter will explore some of the different approaches.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

You do not need to be an anthropologist to know that throughout the world there are many different ideas about how to behave and there always seem to be clashes of moral codes between one culture and another. To many people it seems obscene to chop off a person's hand as punishment for theft or to stone somebody for adultery, yet to many Muslims this is simply the required punishment, and they on their part may condemn what they see as the excessive liberalism and immorality of Western societies.

This is what is known as the *diversity thesis* – because of the diversity across and within cultures there can be no one true morality.

Many other examples of this clash of cultures may be found. Some societies practise polygamy, others monogamy; some have arranged marriages and others are free to make their own choice of spouse; we put our elderly in homes, whereas in other cultures they are valued for their wisdom and have an important place in the family home. For the relativist such differences present no problems – different tribes, different customs. Rules of conduct differ from place to place, as was noted by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus, who recounts an episode in which the King of Persia induced horror on the part of both the Greeks and the Callatians by asking them to adopt each other's funeral practices. What the Greeks took to be right and proper (e.g. burning their dead), the Callatians saw as absolutely abhorrent – Herodotus implied that since fire burned just as well in Greece as in Persia, moral practices are relative to cultural contexts. By implication there is nothing right or wrong universally. This is what is known as the *dependency thesis* – what is right or wrong depends upon the nature of the society. No one can judge the morality of other cultures, as different cultures create different values, and we cannot be objective about another culture since we are all the product of our own culture.

[Chief from Papua New Guinea and his four wives](#)

Aristotle (384–322 BCE)

Aristotle was born in Macedonia. At the age of 17 he moved to Athens, where he joined Plato's Academy. In 347 BCE he moved to Turkey due to the growing political tensions between Macedonia and Athens. He spent his time there investigating science and particularly biology. In 341 BCE he moved with his family back to Macedonia to become tutor to the son of King Philip II of Macedonia, Alexander (who would later become Alexander the Great). After Alexander became king, Aristotle returned to Athens and founded a school called the Lyceum. He remained in Athens teaching until 323, when Alexander the Great died. After Alexander's death it became difficult for Aristotle to stay in Athens, as he was a Macedonian. Worried that he would die like Socrates, Aristotle and his family moved to Chalcis, where he died a year later.

Aristotle was a remarkable person. He tutored students on most traditional subjects that are taught at universities today. He was fascinated with understanding the physical world around him and the universe. His biology books were not superseded by anything better until 2,000 years later. Aristotle also wrote about other areas of study, including drama, rhetoric (public speaking), meteorology, sport and physics.

However, for the absolutist these different forms of behaviour cause a major dilemma. Absolutism implies that forms of behaviour are universally right or wrong – an example of this is that when the nineteenth-century British missionaries went to Africa and Asia they imposed their Western **absolutes** as being more right than local customs. Thus, for example, female converts to Christianity were made to cover their breasts – surely more a sign of Victorian prudery (and the cold British climate) than any universal moral code.

Historically we can also find support for the relativist position – forms of behaviour that were condemned in the past are now considered acceptable and vice versa. We no longer allow acts of cruelty for public entertainment as in the Roman games; homosexuals can enter into same sex marriages or civil partnerships; unmarried mothers are no longer put in mental institutions; slavery is no longer legal and so on. The attitudes of society have changed on many issues.

Morality then does not exist in a vacuum, and what is considered right or wrong must be considered in context, and morality is seen as just a set of common rules and customs that over time have become socially approved and differ from culture to culture. If all morality is rooted in culture, there can be no universal moral principles valid for everyone at all times.

Cultural relativism

What is right or wrong depends on the culture.

Descriptive relativism

Different cultures and societies have differing ethical systems and so morality is relative.

Thought Point

1 Jesus is quoted as saying: 'The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath; so the Son of Man is lord even of the sabbath' (Mark 2: 27b-28).

• Does this mean that all rules are relative in human relationships? Or are there some rules that cannot be broken?

2 Winston Churchill's physician, Lord Moran, once remarked of the French President General de Gaulle: 'He's so stuffed with principles that he has no room for Christian Charity.'

- How relevant is this comment to the discussion on moral relativism?

3 There are many areas of human behaviour about which attitudes have changed.

- Add to this list: hire purchase; cockfighting; the role of women in society.
- Are the changes all for the better?
- What accepted practices today do you think people will look back at in horror in the future (e.g. pollution and gas-guzzling cars; the breeding and slaughter of animals for food; the use of nuclear power for energy)?

THE REASONS FOR RELATIVISM

- The decline of religious authority has meant that people look for other reasons to be ethical.
- A greater understanding of other cultures, particularly from anthropology, has led to an understanding that morality is not absolute and simply means ways of acting that are approved by a particular society.
- Relativism simply explains the differences between one time and another – for instance slavery was acceptable in the past and no longer is.
- The unacceptable effects of interfering with other cultures.
- The influence of meta-ethical analysis – asking what the terms 'ought', 'right' and 'wrong' mean. If there is no agreement about what the words mean then this implies conceptual relativism – what an intuitionist thinks is good is different from what an emotivist thinks.
- The development of competing theories – Utilitarian, intuitionist, egoist, emotivist.

THE WEAKNESSES OF RELATIVISM

Absolute

A principle that is universally binding.

Moral objectivism

Truth is objectively real regardless of culture.

- It implies that there can be no real evaluation or criticism of practices such as the burning of witches, human sacrifice, slavery, the Holocaust or the torture of the innocent.
- Relativism does not allow societies to progress (e.g. the realisation that slavery was unacceptable was slow to develop – but no one would doubt that we have made progress).
- Relativism seems to give little reason for behaving morally except to be socially acceptable.
- Although relativism is not subjectivism, it is only a step away and may come to this problematic

position.

- Some statements are true absolutely (e.g. 'It is wrong to torture innocent people', 'It is right for parents to be responsible for their children'). Just because cultures vary, it does not mean that there is no objective 'good'.
- Ethical beliefs can change when challenged – primitive practices do stop.

Note: Relativists do not reject moral principles. They say that all the different moral principles in the world are valid relative to the culture. Believing that moral values are relative does not mean that a person does not have any moral values.

Consequentialism

The rightness or wrongness of an act is determined by its consequences.

NORMATIVE RELATIVISM

Normative ethics is where actions are assessed according to ethical theories – it is about what is actually right or good and not simply about cultural diversity and cultural dependency. A relativist will normally hold at least one absolute principle: that it is wrong to impose absolute moral rules.

Both Utilitarianism and Situation Ethics are thought of as examples of normative theories, but they are different in the way they understand this. However, it is important to note that neither theory is completely relativist as they have one absolute each – love for Situation Ethics and the greatest happiness principle for Utilitarianism. Utilitarians recognise 'happiness', 'pleasure' or 'well-being' as the result of good actions, but accept that this may differ from culture to culture. Situationists, like Fletcher, reject the use of words like 'never', 'always' and 'absolute' and adopt a pragmatic approach to decision-making. The only exception is that love should be seen as the absolute. 'Love relativises the absolute.' Fletcher described his theory as relativistic.

Normative relativists reject the principle of objectivity or absolutism and see morality as something that evolves and changes.

Utilitarianism is looked at in more detail in another chapter, so this chapter will focus on Situation Ethics.

SITUATION ETHICS

Joseph Fletcher developed Situation Ethics in the 1960s in reaction to Christian legalism and antinomianism (which is the belief that there are no fixed moral principles, but that morality is the result of individual spontaneous acts).

Fletcher argues that each individual situation is different and absolute rules are too demanding and restrictive. The Bible shows what good moral decisions look like in particular situations, but it is not possible to know what God's will is in every situation. Fletcher says: 'I simply do not know and cannot know what God is doing.' As it is not possible to know God's will in every situation, *love* or *agape* is Situation Ethics' only moral 'rule'.

So it is not just the situation that guides what you should do, but the principle of agape and the guiding maxims of the Christian community: 'Do not commit murder', 'Do not commit adultery', 'Do not steal', 'Do not lie'. Situation Ethics is midway between legalism and antinomianism, and

Fletcher's book, which was published in 1966, reflected the mood of the times – Christians should make the right choices without just following rules and by thinking for themselves.

Christians should base their decisions on one single rule – the rule of agape. This love is not merely an emotion but involves doing what is best for the other person, unconditionally. This means that other guiding maxims could be ignored in certain situations if they do not serve agape; for example, Fletcher says it would be right for a mother with a 13-year-old daughter who is having sex to break the rules about under-age sex and insist her daughter uses contraception – the right choice is the most loving thing and it will depend on the situation. However, the situation can never change the rule of agape which is always good and right regardless of the circumstances.

According to Fletcher's **Situation Ethics**, this ethical theory depends on four working principles and six fundamental principles.

Joseph Fletcher (1905–1991)

Fletcher was an American professor who founded the theory of Situation Ethics in the 1960s. He was a pioneer in bioethics and was involved in the areas of abortion, infanticide, euthanasia, eugenics and cloning. Fletcher was an Episcopalian priest, but later renounced his belief in God and became an atheist.

The four working principles

1 *Pragmatism* – what you propose must work in practice.

2 *Relativism* – words like 'always', 'never', 'absolute' are rejected. There are no fixed rules, but all decisions must be relative to agape.

3 *Positivism* – a value judgement needs to be made, giving the first place to love.

4 *Personalism* – people are put in first place, morality is personal and not centred on laws.

The six fundamental principles

1 Love (agape) is the only absolute. It is the only thing that is intrinsically 'good' and 'right', regardless of the situation.

2 This love is self-giving love, which seeks the best interests of others but allows people the freedom and responsibility to choose the right thing for themselves.

3 Justice will follow from love, because 'justice is love distributed'. If love is put into practice, it can only result in justice. Justice is concerned with giving everyone their due – its concern is with neighbours, not just our neighbour.

4 Love has no favourites and does not give those whom we like preferential treatment – it is good will which reaches out to strangers, acquaintances, friends and even enemies.

5 Love must be the final end, not a means to an end – people must choose what to do because the action will result in love, not be loving in order to achieve some other result.

6 The loving thing to do will depend on the situation – and as situations differ, an action that might be right in one situation could be wrong in another. This is quite different from traditional Christian ethics and is far more relativistic, having just one moral rule – agape.

Strengths of Situation Ethics

- Situation Ethics is easy to understand and can be constantly updated for new problems and issues as they arise, such as genetic engineering and foetal research.
- It is flexible and can take different situations into account, but it is based on the Christian concept of love.
- It focuses on humans and concern for others – agape.
- Situation Ethics allows people to take responsibility for their own decisions and make up their own minds about what is right or wrong. Bishop John Robinson called it 'an ethic for humanity come of age'.

Weaknesses of Situation Ethics

- This method of decision-making was condemned in 1952 by Pope Pius XII, who said it was wrong to make decisions based on individual circumstances if these went against the teaching of the Church and the Bible.
- It is not possible to determine the consequences of actions – how do we know that the result will be the most loving for all concerned?

Situation Ethics has just one moral rule – agape or unconditional love – and it is relative in that it accepts that different decisions will be right or wrong according to the circumstance.

Thought Point

These examples are taken from **William Barclay's** *Ethics in a Permissive Society* (1971). Barclay wants you to agree with the actions; can you see other ways of acting?

1 Suppose in a burning house there is your aged father, an old man, with the days of his usefulness at an end, and a doctor who has discovered a cure for one of the world's great killer diseases and who still carries the formulae in his head, and you can save only one – whom do you save? Your father who is dear to you, or the doctor in whose hands there are thousands of lives? Which is love?

2 On the Wilderness trail, Daniel Boone's trail, westward through Cumberland Gap to Kentucky, many families in the trail caravans lost their lives to the Indians. A Scottish woman had a baby at the breast. The baby was ill and crying, and the baby's crying was betraying her other three children and the rest of the party; the party clearly could not remain hidden if the baby continued crying; their position would be given away. Well, the mother clung to the baby; the baby's cries led the Indians to the position, the party was discovered, and all were massacred. There was another such occasion. On this occasion there was a Negro woman in the party. Her baby too was crying and threatening to betray the party. She strangled the baby with her own two hands to stop its crying – and the whole party escaped. Which action is love?

3 What about the commandment that you must not kill? When T.E. Lawrence was leading his Arabs, two of his men had a quarrel and in the quarrel Hamed killed Salem. Lawrence knew that a blood feud would arise in which both families would be involved, and that one whole family would be out to murder the other whole family. What did Lawrence do? He thought it out and then with his own hands he killed Hamed and thus stopped the blood feud. Was this right? Was this action that stopped a blood feud and prevented scores of people from being murdered an act of murder

or of love?

4 Ethically, has humanity come of age, as Bishop John Robinson suggested in 1966?

5 To what extent is love compatible with human nature?

6 Why might critics of Situation Ethics argue that it is really Utilitarianism under a different name?

7 Explain why some critics have questioned whether Situation Ethics is really Christian.

WHAT IS ETHICAL ABSOLUTISM?

An ethical absolute is a command that is true for all time, in all places and in all situations. Certain things are right or wrong from an *objective* point of view and cannot change according to culture. Certain actions are *intrinsically* right or wrong, which means they are right or wrong in themselves.

According to moral absolutism, there are eternal moral values applicable everywhere. Absolutism gives people clear guidelines for behaviour and accepts a universal set of absolutes. This is a popular position for those who believe in a God who establishes moral order in the universe. This approach is deontological. The consequences of an action are not taken into consideration.

This ethical system is easy and simple to apply – a crime is a crime, regardless of circumstances. If we take murder as an example – is it all right to kill someone for no reason? Both the ethical relativist and the ethical absolutist would say no. Now if we assume the murderer is a doctor who could kill one patient to save another – again both the ethical relativist and the ethical absolutist would still say this was not right. However, if we consider killing one person to save many lives, the ethical relativist will feel it is all right to kill, but for the ethical absolutist it is still wrong.

Absolute ethics allows judgements to be made about the actions of others – we can say the Holocaust was absolutely wrong. Absolute ethics allows courts of law to exist and order to be maintained.

Where do these absolute laws come from? For a theist the answer is simple – they come from God. For the agnostic or atheist the answer is more complicated – they just seem a priori in nature. They fit into Plato's world of the Forms, as there are some things we just seem to know are wrong without being taught: do you remember your parents ever telling you not to sleep with your sister? So to some extent moral absolutes can be seen as inherent in the nature of man.

MORAL ABSOLUTISM AND RELIGION

Many religions have moral absolutist positions as they see laws as having been set by the deity or deities. Such a position is seen as unchanging and perfect; for example, the Ten Commandments.

Moral absolutism

There is only one correct answer to every moral problem.

For one person, therefore, violence may be considered wrong, even in self-defence; for another, homosexuality is considered fundamentally wrong, even when the couple are in a monogamous relationship. Many who make such claims even ignore evolving norms within their own communities, such as the rows about homosexual priests within the Anglican Church. In the past slavery was supported by religious believers, whereas today no religious group would endorse it.

Today many Christians believe there is a hierarchy of absolutes – a view called ‘graded absolutism’. If there is a conflict between two absolutes, it is our duty to obey the higher one: duty to God comes first, then duty to others, followed by duty to property. Under this view, Corrie ten Boom (1892–1983) was morally right to lie to the Nazis about the Jews her family was hiding, because protecting lives is a higher moral value than telling the truth to murderers.

NORMATIVE ABSOLUTISM

The two absolutist theories that are dealt with elsewhere in this book are Natural Law, which is a religious theory, and Kantian Ethics, which is based on reason. However, even theories that are relativist in practice contain an absolute core – the greatest good for the greatest number in Utilitarianism and agape in Situation Ethics.

Strengths of absolutism

- Absolutism gives a fixed ethical code by which to measure actions.
- One culture can judge that the actions of another are wrong (e.g. genocide) and then act on that judgement.
- Absolutism can support universal laws such as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.

Weaknesses of absolutism

- Absolutism does not take into account the circumstances of each situation.
- Absolutists can seem intolerant of cultural diversity.
- How do we actually know what absolute morals are, as all sources of morality are open to human interpretation?
- Absolutism may often be seen as an impossible ideal.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ABSOLUTISM AND RELATIVISM

Absolutism

- There is an objective moral truth
- Absolute ethics are deontological, concerned with the action not the results
- Moral actions are intrinsically right or wrong – right or wrong in themselves regardless of culture, time, place, opinion or situation
- Moral truth is universal and unchanging

- Absolutism gives clear guidelines for behaviour and so it is easy to make ethical decisions
- Absolutism cannot take into account the circumstances
- Absolutism can seem intolerant of cultural diversity

Relativism

- There is no objective moral truth
- Moral values vary according to culture, time, place and religion
- Morals are subject to culture, time, place and religion – morals are subjective
- The existence of different views does not mean they are all equal
- Relativism explains why people hold different values and it is a flexible system that can fit a variety of lifestyles
- Relativism cannot condemn different cultural practices
- If the ideas of relativism were accepted universally, relativism would become an absolute moral code

REVIEW QUESTIONS

Look back over the chapter and check that you can answer the following questions:

- 1 In ten bullet points explain what is meant by Cultural relativism, including the difference between the diversity thesis and the dependency thesis.
- 2 List the main weaknesses of relativism.
- 3 What is the historical background to Situation Ethics?
- 4 List the principles on which Situation Ethics is based.
- 5 List the strengths of absolutism.

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